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ORCHIDS FOR MOTHER

By Aaron Latham.

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At one time, as part of a complicated operation, the C.I.A. considered using phosphorescent foxes; at another, incendiary bats. During World War II, the agency planned to bombard Hitler with hard-core pornography because their psychiatrist said that this would drive him even crazier. King Farouk's urine was stolen in an attempt to ascertain his state of health. A scheme to cause Castro's beard to fall out was promulgated. The toilets at an international Communist youth festival were to be plugged in order to show that Communism doesn't work.

This is the kind of fun Aaron Latham pokes at the C.I.A., the bad fairy of American politics, in "Orchids for Mother." The Mother of the title is a code name for Francis Xavier Kimball, head of counterintelligence and the Israeli desk. True to the Sidney Greenstreet tradition, Mother is an intellectual who learnedly discusses Ezra Pound, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. He even has a theory about the title of one of Pound's most famous poems,

"Hugh Selwyn Mauberley": He believes it to be a pun on "Où s'éloigne Mauberley?" or "where is Mauberley going?" Referring to the fact that "Pound knew his country and his age had rejected him, but he didn't know where he could go."

Also in more or less stock character are Mother's neuter-waspishness, his hobby of growing rare orchids, his habit of retiring to the purified air of the greenhouse to cleanse his soul of the "necessary" sins of his trade. Paul, Mother's protégé, pursued poetry because he believed in literature; God because He was more all-embracing than poetry; and, finally, patriotism, "the last refuge of scoundrels," in the C.I.A. During training, Paul falls for Frances Fisher, whose father was a legend in the C.I.A. until he committed suicide.

Mr. Latham writes well and "Orchids for Mother" begins blithely enough, carried by Frances's emancipated antics as Paul's mistress and by Mother's self-deprecating aphorisms, such as: "The agency recruits its boys early and then keeps them cloistered. And that's a good way to keep them faithful. Of course, faith can lead to religious wars."

Israel's is the religious war in this case. The time is just before the Yom Kippur conflict and the C.I.A. has learned that Israel is about to be attacked. Mother wants to warn them, but the Secretary of State under former President Nixon forbids this, for, as he puts it, Israel would then "strike first, rout the Arabs, and be more intractable than ever at the negotiating table."

This part of "Orchids for Mother" involves a rather sour change of tone, from antic to polemic, and it tends to throw the book out of balance. Frances becomes convinced, not very convincingly, that her father did not commit suicide but was murdered at Mother's orders. Mother, after some not very witty bickering with the head of the C.I.A., is fired and plans a revenge which is clearly supposed to be the pièce de résistance of the book. It isn't, and by now the reader is too witted for us to care very much. ■